

GENE TAGUE

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by

Gene Tague

PROLOGUE

A sliver of East Texas moonlight sneaked between Lester Brown's frayed bedroom curtains and painted a bright stripe across the threadbare green carpet. On the nightstand beside the old man's bed, a wind-up alarm clock tick-tocked erratically. At 1:45 it ticked, skipped a beat, tocked, then stopped. Snorting and wheezing in his sleep, Lester rolled onto his side, taking the blanket with him.

Outside, the storm had passed, leaving the night as quiet as a graveyard.

In the distance a dog barked.

Lester's eyelids twitched. In his dream, a gorgeous young woman gazed hungrily at him through a smoky haze. She wore a tight black dress with a slit that revealed a long tanned leg. Full creamy breasts overflowed the bodice. In the background a cowboy twanged a guitar and sang about love gone wrong. The woman smiled at Lester and ran the tip of her tongue over ruby red lips. Lester hugged his blanket closer.

A gentle breeze gusted. Leaves rustled.

In his dream, the scene moved from the barroom to the bedroom. The woman slipped out of her slinky dress. Her breasts swayed gently. Lester gulped. She rolled him onto his back. His heart thudded. Straddling him, she smothered him with burning flesh.

A shrill scream pierced the night.

Lester jerked upright in his lumpy old bed. Half asleep, he reached for his dream lover. Instead of hot flesh, his fingers found cool night air. He rubbed his eyes. The dream faded, but the scream echoed in his head. Pulse still pounding in his ears, he frantically looked around the dark bedroom. Wilma lay beside him, snoring peacefully. He rubbed his eyes again, then shook his head. Wilma snorted and rolled on her side, taking the blanket with her. Goose bumps popped out on his scrawny arms. He yanked on the blanket. Mumbling in her sleep, she tugged at one corner but he held fast to his side. She finally gave up. Pulling the blanket up under his chin, he lay back down. In the battle over the blanket he'd forgotten about the hot, sweaty dream, and the scream that had yanked him out of his personal paradise. He yawned and closed his eyes.

Another scream shattered the silence.

Lester jumped, then lay perfectly still, eyes scrunched tightly, heart lodged in his throat as it hammered wildly. A third, muffled scream sent another wave of chills racing down his spine.

Trembling, Lester opened one eye and peeked toward the window. His nearest neighbor lived two miles down the road. The sound had come from a lot closer than that. He hugged his blanket tighter and looked at Wilma snoring quietly at his side. Sometimes in her sleep she screeched like a crazy person. He wanted to believe that's what he'd heard. Truth was he knew better. Hadn't been that close. He looked back toward the window. Maybe it hadn't been a scream. Coulda been an old hound dog baying at the moon. He grinned. He liked that. No shrieking woman, just an old hound dog. Nothing to get excited about. But the grin faded. No damned dog had made that God awful noise.

Five minutes later, he'd cleared up the mystery. He'd decided the screams had been part of a nightmare. Now that he'd solved the problem, his heart slowed and he could breathe normally again. He closed his eyes and snuggled under the covers. Then, just as he was about to drift off to sleep, he remembered the shiny new Corvette and the pretty little gal with the big boobs that had stretched her black sweater out of shape. He'd checked her and her boyfriend into cabin 18 early in the evening, right in the worst part of the storm. It took a moment for his muddled brain to make the connections. First, the big boobs and black silky dress that belonged to the busty sex-pot in his dream. He smiled. Second, the girl with the big boobs and black sweater in cabin 18. And a woman screaming. His eyes flew open and his heart begin to pound again.

He slipped out of bed, wrapped himself in his scruffy old robe and tottered to the window, silently cursing the wet weather. Every time it rained, his bones ached for a week. Stooped over, he craned his neck and peeked through the crack in the curtains.

The black Corvette glistened in the moonlight. He sighed and shook his head. He'd never seen anything so snazzy in his whole life. He clenched his fists. He could almost feel the cool steering wheel in his grip. He sucked in a deep breath, savoring the smell of the new interior. That snooty old widow woman down the road would be begging him for a ride if he had a car like that. Boy would he give her a ride.

Reality settled in and he remembered why he'd gotten out of bed. He tore his gaze away from the fancy sports car and glanced toward cabin 18. A pale yellow light glowed through the curtains.

He stared at the light, then pulled his robe tighter and squinted toward the telephone. If he called the sheriff and nothing was wrong he'd look like a fool. He glanced back at the window. Sure as shootin', the scream had sounded like someone being murdered. Shivering, he turned back toward the phone, but then a lecherous grin split his wrinkled old face. It had been so long since old Wilma had let him have his way with her that he'd almost forgotten how she used to holler and carry on when they'd had sex.

Back at the window he looked toward cabin 18. He imagined sweaty bodies and bouncing boobs. His grin broadened. If it hadn't been so danged cold outside he would have slipped around back and had himself a peek in the window.

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The next morning shortly after sunrise Lester shuffled into the motel office. Yawning, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the back of a gnarled hand, then prodded around inside the old pot bellied wood stove with a smoke-blackened piece of pipe until he uncovered one lonely coal glowing dull red among the grey ashes.

Half an hour later, the roaring fire had chased the chill from the room. Lester poured himself a cup of steaming black coffee, set it on the counter, and squinted at the morning paper. His lips moved as he read.

Houston police were summoned to the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Willis McPhearson shortly before noon yesterday. Concerned neighbors reported they hadn't seen the elderly couple in over a week. Investigating officers discovered Mr. McPhearson's body just inside the door. He had been struck on the head with a heavy, blunt object. Police found Mrs. McPhearson's body upstairs in her bed. She had been stabbed twelve times in the upper torso. Police discovered the murder weapons, a heavy brass paperweight and a large butcher knife, under the bed. Officers on the scene stated that it appeared the couple had been dead for several days. The McPhearson's had been prominent in the area since moving here from New York ten years ago. They supported the local symphony and ballet...

Lester lay the paper aside. "Whole damned world's going to hell," he muttered to himself, glancing around the small office. "Goddamned hoodlums. A body ain't safe in his own home no more." His gaze shifted to the front door. The dead bolt had jammed in the unlocked position last month. He'd hit it with a hammer but it hadn't budged. Finally, he'd given up and bought a new lock, but he hadn't gotten around to installing it. He glanced back at the front page, at the picture of the two body bags. He'd install the new lock today, as soon as it warmed up a little. He turned the page and reached for his coffee. He'd had a chill deep his bones ever since those fool kids had woke him up last night. His hand closed on the hot cup.

A bloodcurdling scream pierced the clear morning air. Lester jerked upright, stumbled backward, and nearly fell over the stool. The heavy mug crashed to the floor. Hot coffee splattered his slippers and bare ankles. Razor sharp shards of glass skittered across the floor. His heart banged against his ribs. "Damned kids," he swore, trying unsuccessfully to remember the last time he'd gotten laid before breakfast. Then his scowl faded, and he grinned. By damn, this morning he would sneak around back and have a peek. He stumbled toward the door and looked toward number 18.

The shiny new sports car was gone.

He frowned at the cabin, trying to piece the puzzle together in his muddled brain. The rest of the cabins were vacant, and as far as he knew old Wilma was still in bed snoring up a storm. This time he hadn't been asleep so he knew it couldn't have been a nightmare. And it hadn't been his imagination either. He'd heard a woman scream.

Just then the door to cabin 18 flew open and slammed against the wall. Wilma stumbled out onto the small porch.

A sharp pain shot up Lester's left arm. He hunched forward, hugging his arm to his side. His chest felt like someone had parked a dump truck on it. He couldn't breathe. The pain stabbed him again. "Damned old woman," he mumbled, "could scare a body to death."

Wilma hobbled toward him. His vision dimmed and he clutched his chest, sagging against the door frame. Wilma seemed to be fighting her way through a long hazy tunnel, her image fading in and out among a swirl of flickering fireflies. Only fireflies didn't glow in bright sunlight. And for the life of him he couldn't figure out why in the devil she was screaming her fool head off. They hadn't seen a mouse in over a month, since the exterminator had charged them an arm and a leg to get rid of the danged pests. Another burst of pain exploded in Lester's chest. His legs crumpled and he dropped to the floor. A misty blackness enveloped him.

When he came to he was sitting propped against the door frame, staring straight at cabin 18. The door sagged drunkenly. Wilma had probably broken the dad-blamed thing when she'd opened it. Now he'd have to fix it. Damned old woman would be the death of him yet.

Just then Wilma slid to a stop in the mud and glared down at him. "Get off'n yer ass and call the sheriff ya old fool," she screeched. "Somebody's been kilt in there."

CHAPTER ONE

Thirty years after Lester Brown suffered his near fatal heart attack, Trish MacDonald, star of the Trish MacDonald show, walked rapidly down a hospital corridor in Scottsdale, Arizona. She wore a lime green suit, the same shade as her eyes. Matching accessories, a white silk blouse, and jade earrings contrasted nicely with her shoulder length strawberry blonde hair. Not exactly hospital greens, but then this was the last place she'd expected to be today.

Her heels clicked rhythmically as she neared the waiting room. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a young man look away from the television, stare at her for a moment, then elbow his buddy. The young man's friend followed his line of sight and they both smiled appreciatively. Without breaking stride, Trish smiled back at the two

young men. She barely noticed the room's only other occupant; a man in a grey suit, sitting in the far corner with his face hidden behind a newspaper.

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As Trish passed, the man in the grey suit set his paper aside. As she walked away, his pale grey eyes bored twin holes into her back. Will Rogers had said he'd never met a man he didn't like. The man in the grey suit put a little different twist on Will's famous saying. The man with the cold grey eyes had never met a woman he didn't hate.

The man with the grey eyes had never known the first woman in his life, but his mother had profoundly influenced his life. She'd started by naming him Wesley. Then, less than two weeks after she'd brought him into the world she ran off with a cross-country trucker, leaving little Wesley to be raised by his father. That Bible-thumping, whiskey drinking hulk of a man taught Wesley that women were whores, put on earth to tempt men with their bodies. Eve had started the whole thing when she'd led Adam astray, and women had been plaguing mankind ever since. His father preached that those who gave in to the lustful ways of women spent eternity roasting in hell. Wesley had grown up hating his name, his father, and most of all, women. At fifteen he'd run away from home, thumbed his way north, changed his name to Butch, which he thought sounded tough, and gotten a job running errands for a penny ante crook. Now, twenty years later, he'd risen in the ranks of the mob and added a couple letters to his name. His mobster friends called him Butcher.

When Trish turned into Milford Bennington's room, Butcher stood, straightened his tie, and followed.

* * *

Trish stepped into the private room and in spite of herself she stopped short and stared. She'd pictured Milford Bennington as six two, rangy, a hundred and ninety pounds, with silver hair and piercing blue eyes. The man in the bed looked more like five foot six and a hundred thirty pounds, dripping wet. His dark, bird-like eyes stared at her from under a large turban-like bandage. She stepped back outside the room and glanced at the number, then back down the hall. A man wearing a grey suit ducked his head and quickly turned into the room next door. Trish barely noticed. She had other things on her mind.

Chewing her lower lip, she stared down the now empty hallway. When she'd called from the airport to make an appointment with Bennington, his wife had acted strange, almost hostile. It had taken five minutes to get the name of the hospital and the room number. Now she was beginning to wonder if the woman had made the whole thing up just to get rid of her.

Trish had always had a kind of sixth sense about certain things. In her business people were always trying to sell her on some harebrained idea. When she'd read Bennington's letter it had sounded like a case of sour grapes, but she'd gotten a strong feeling that Bennington was not just another crackpot. That was why she'd come to Arizona to check him out instead of sending one of her staff. Now she was beginning to wonder if she'd made a mistake.

She stepped back into the room. The man in the bed looked at her. She inched closer. "Mr. Bennington?"

He nodded, wincing as he did so.

"Hi. I'm Trish MacDonald."

He didn't respond.

Her gaze shifted to the bandage and she cringed. "Does it hurt?"

He didn't answer.

She frowned. "Uh, look, I'm sorry to hear about your accident. Maybe I should come back another time."

"No!" He glanced toward the door, then back, as he motioned her closer and whispered, "He tried to kill me."

Trish stiffened and glanced over her shoulder, then frown deepening, turned back and studied the man in the bed. "Your wife said it was an accident. Are you saying someone tried to kill you?"

"Shhh."

She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "You think someone tried to kill you?"

His dark gaze darted around the room and then locked onto hers. "Yes. Taylor. Jack Taylor tried to kill me."

Trish's eyes narrowed. The nurse had told her they expected to release Bennington the next day. The doctor had admitted him for observation because of his age. Trish wondered if the injury had rattled the old man's brain. She gave a mental shrug. Since she was here she might as well learn as much as possible. Later, she could sort the facts from the fantasy. She pulled a straightbacked chair close to Bennington's bed and sat down. "Was Reverend Taylor involved in the accident?"

Bennington clenched his fists and his dark eyes flashed. "Don't call him that! He's no reverend. A reverend is a man of God. Taylor is in cahoots with the devil."

"In your letter you told me he has a church. A rather large one in fact."

"He does, but he's the devil's disciple. And it was no accident. Jack Taylor tried to kill me."

She looked into Bennington's eyes. She saw anger and fear, but he didn't look crazy. Of course, neither had Jeffrey Dahmer. She leaned closer. "What makes you so certain that Reverend, sorry, that Jack Taylor tried to kill you?"

For an instant pain clouded his eyes, then they brightened again. "Green pickup ran me off the road. Taylor tried to have me killed. The police don't believe me."

Trish frowned. "Does Taylor drive a green pickup?" Bennington gripped the safety rails on each side of his bed so hard his knuckles blanched. "Cut me off on purpose. No accident I tell you. Taylor tried to murder me."

"Taylor ran you off the road?"

"No." His eyes narrowed. "One of his thugs."

Trish sighed. Bennington sounded as if he belonged in the psycho ward. It looked like this time her intuition had led her astray, but she had already wasted most of the day. A few more minutes wouldn't make that much difference. She reached in her purse and took out a small tape recorder. "Do you feel up to telling me the whole story?"

He groaned and the color drained from his face.

She rose. "Look. You're in pain. Let's just forget the whole thing. I'll--"

"No!" His arm snaked between the safety rails and he grabbed her wrist. "Just a headache. I'll be all right." She tried to pull away, but he held on tightly. "Next time he'll kill me."

She glanced toward the door, wondering how long it would take for the nurses to arrive if she screamed. She looked back at Bennington and they stared at one another for a moment. Finally, she broke eye contact and looked down at the hand clinging to her wrist. His fingers were like talons. He had the grip of a man possessed. She looked back into his eyes, searching for signs of madness. He relaxed his grip. "Please. If you don't help me, he'll kill me."

She pulled her arm away and stepped back, rubbing her wrist. She'd seen no signs of madness, only terror. But just in case, she slid the chair further away from the bed, beyond his reach, and sat down. "Okay," she said, nodding at Bennington while she punched a button on the tape recorder, "go ahead."

"It started fourteen months ago," he began. "Martha and I, Martha's my wife-- she thinks Taylor walks on water," Bennington paused, made a distasteful face, then continued. "Anyway, we received a dinner invitation from *Reverend*", he sneered when he said the word, "and Mrs. Taylor. I didn't want to go, but Martha insisted. When we arrived at their home, Taylor, his wife Cora, and five other couples greeted us. The Taylors served a delightful dinner. We had a fine time and after the second glass of wine I admit I got into the spirit of things and began to enjoy the evening. Later, over coffee, Taylor told us that he needed to raise \$1.5 million to construct a new building at Jack Taylor University. He said it would allow the university to graduate fifteen additional medical doctors every year." Bennington coughed and motioned for his water.

Trish filled the glass and held it for him, ready to jerk her hand away at the first suspicious move.

He took a small sip and waved it away. "Thanks. Anyway, when Taylor explained that each student had agreed that upon graduation he would serve one year in an underdeveloped third world nation, it sounded like a worthy cause to Martha and me and the other five couples. Taylor cinched the deal when he said that if between us we'd contribute the \$1.5 million, he'd place our names in a hat and draw one and the lucky couple would have the building named after them. I guess I got a little over enthusiastic, or maybe it was the wine--I don't know--but with Martha's urging I wrote a check for \$400,000.00. Ours was the largest contribution. Maybe that's why we won. I don't know if the drawing was rigged. At the time I didn't much care. I admit, the idea

of having a major building on a university campus named after me appealed to my ego. I went home that night feeling pretty good.

"Before long, though, the problems began. We waited months and nothing happened. They still haven't broken ground. All I get is flimsy excuses."

Trish sat perfectly still, not saying a word but taking everything in.

His dark eyes flashed. "The simple truth is, Taylor conned us. He never had any intention of constructing a new building. He might as well have put a gun to my head and stolen the money. That's why he tried to kill me. He knows he can't bamboozle me like the others."

Trish left Bennington's hospital room more than a little confused. She didn't put much faith in Bennington's story. Even in person, it sounded like sour grapes. She couldn't imagine a well known, highly respected minister taking that kind of a chance. But then who would have expected Jim and Tammy Bakker to take the kind of stupid chances they took? And, her sixth sense kept telling her this could be a really big story. Walking across the parking lot to her car, she decided it wouldn't hurt to do a little more checking.

* * *

Butcher stepped out of the hospital and squinted in the bright sunlight. As Trish walked toward her car, Butcher slipped on a pair of dark sunglasses, then glanced quickly around the large lot. Satisfied that no one was watching, he followed at a discreet distance.